

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 596

HE 016 520

AUTHOR Selin, Larry R.; Gates, Larry C.
TITLE Self-Study of Support Units to Inform Institutional Planning. AIR 1983 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (23rd, Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alumni; *College Admission; *College Planning; Computer Oriented Programs; Higher Education; *Personnel Management; Program Development; *Registrars (School); Research Methodology; *Self Evaluation (Groups)
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum

ABSTRACT

The involvement of a large regional university's institutional support units in a self-study is discussed. The university had initiated its first experience with a comprehensive and systematic approach to planning. Attention is focused on the self-study procedures in the support units and on the resulting reports. Four support units with diverse functions and purposes were analyzed: admissions and records, alumni and development, computer services, and personnel. Three sources of information were used: self-study reports from each of the four support units, interviews with directors of the four support units, and interviews with members of an institutional self-study team who were responsible for reviewing all unit reports and preparing an overall assessment of the university. Content analysis was used in evaluating each unit's responses to six areas of inquiry: unit purpose and goals, major activities of the unit and links to the unit's purpose and goals, interrelationships between the unit and other academic or support units, resources required to support the unit's major activities, a university-wide perspective in the unit's responses, and a future-orientation in the unit's responses. Interviews examined the self-study procedures and benefits of the process. (SW)

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SELF-STUDY OF SUPPORT UNITS TO INFORM INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING

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Larry R. Selin
Research Associate
Office of Institutional Research
Southwest Missouri State University
Springfield, Missouri 65804

Larry C. Gates
Director
Office of Institutional Research
Southwest Missouri State University
Springfield, Missouri 65804

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Paper presented at the 23rd Annual Forum of the
Association for Institutional Research
Toronto, May 1983

AE 016520



THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Third Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26, 1983. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. K. Coleman, Chairman
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Abstract

Both in planning and in the related literature, minimal attention is given to the study of support units. This study critically examines the self-study of support units in a large regional university that is initiating its first experience with a comprehensive, systematic approach to planning. With the purpose of gaining insights to guide subsequent practice, this study focuses on the self-study procedures in support units and on the resulting reports. Recommendations to improve the quality of self-studies by support units are provided.

The primary activities of colleges and universities involve teaching, research, and service. But colleges and universities are also involved in numerous secondary activities which support academic programs directly (e.g., library, educational media, academic computing) and which support the institution more generally (e.g., personnel, physical plant, purchasing, finance). These support units are critical to an institution because the quality of support they provide can affect the effectiveness of academic programs and because these units consume substantial portions of institutional resources. This paper examines the involvement of institutional support units in a common organizational planning activity--self-study.

Involvement of Support Units in Self-Study

The relevance of self-study in support units as a topic for study and discussion derives from the minimal attention it receives in the literature on planning in higher education in contrast to its importance. Relevance also derives from the requirements for effective participation in planning by support units--that they be capable of assessing themselves and of communicating that assessment to institutional decision makers.

Regarding the practice of self-study in higher education, more generally, reports are not encouraging. Based on his considerable experience, Kells (1981) finds the overall picture "frantic, troubled, and difficult to comprehend" (p. 15). Moreover, campus leaders seem neither to understand their task, nor to bring expected levels of professionalism to these tasks. Diamond and Kelly (in Cohn, 1979), offer a similarly harsh critique of decision-making processes affecting academic support units. They find such processes marked by "poor logic, worse communication, and the use of inappropriate if not irrelevant criteria for judging their effectiveness" (p.11).

Although the self-study phase of planning is the topic of this paper, effective participation by support units in all aspects of planning is important to an institution. Writing on program reviews, Sagan (1974) suggests that to achieve organizational effectiveness all institutional units should be

involved. Craven (1980) lists academic support services as a major dimension to be addressed in the self-study of an academic program. Writers commonly refer to the facilitating role of support services for academic programs (Balderston, 1974; Cohn, 1979; Millett, 1980). From a financial perspective, support units gain importance because of the large amount of resources they consume. Given the inflexibility of many academic budgets because of tenure commitments, support unit budgets may be the primary resource for maintaining financial flexibility (Braun, 1982; Millett, 1980). Because of the vulnerability of some of these units, however, care should be taken to protect them from short-sighted opportunists (Cohn, 1979). Finally, since some support units obtain their responsibilities through accretion of tasks over time (Balderston, 1974; Braun, 1982), their inclusion in planning processes may reveal activities that are no longer considered necessary or desirable.

Support Units and the Higher Education Planning Literature

Despite the importance of support units, review of the literature on planning in higher education reveals that little has been written about the involvement of non-instructional units, whether the phase of planning involves self-study, goal setting, or evaluation. Though some type of self-study or assessment is recommended by many planning guides (e.g., Dressel, 1971; Greene, Nayyar, and Ruch, 1979; Kieft, Armijo, and Bucklew, 1978), few references to support units are given. When an author has specified the importance of involving all units in planning, the examples and planning forms provided tend to emphasize academic units.

In literature on the review and evaluation of support units, self-study and assessment within these units may be noted as a component of the review process, but this component is seldom a point of emphasis or detailed discussion. Some important observations, however, have been made. Diamond and Kelly of Syracuse University's Center for Instructional Development stressed the importance of commonly understood evaluation criteria for academic support units (in Cohn, 1979). Poor

understanding of the criteria by which they will be judged may lead to inappropriate program emphases and reporting the "wrong" data on their performance. Such poor understanding can lead to an untimely demise at the hands of administrators or constituents who were expecting something else. To address this problem, Diamond and Kelly have developed a 54-item questionnaire to help focus attention on relevant criteria for review. Several instances of poor (or no) communication about the relevant criteria for evaluating an academic support unit are cited.

Braun (1982) shared his experience as a participant in a review of support units at the University of Calgary. He described the functions of the steering committee for the review, phases of the review process, and types of information collected. In addition, helpful discussions of major decision points and alternatives considered are provided. One major design issue was how to accommodate the diversity of a large number (28 in this instance) of support units. Braun makes a point related to Diamond and Kelly's concern for known evaluation criteria--that institutionally acceptable "terms of reference" provide a foundation for review decisions. Decisions about effectiveness and necessary resources are difficult when the unit's responsibilities are not specified. A questionnaire form sent to individual units (with responses from one unit) is appended by Braun, but no comments were offered regarding the unit's responses.

At the University of Minnesota, the review of support units complements review of academic units in the university planning process. Pflaum (1982) reported on the process used with four units reporting to the Vice President for Administration and Planning: Men's Intercollegiate Athletics, Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, Emergency Management, and the Police Department. Following the example of graduate program reviews a three-tiered approach was used: 1) self-assessment, 2) internal (to the university) assessment, and 3) external (to the university) assessment. Effectiveness, efficiency, and management competence were emphasized. Among the perceived strengths of the Minnesota reviews was the consistency between

the academic and support review process, both of which begin with self-study and assessment. The emphasis, however, was on the review process and not the detail of self-study within the unit.

Several reasons seem evident for the limited attention given to the self-study of support units in the literature on higher education (and presumably in practice as well): 1) the support unit's role in providing secondary rather than primary educational products and services, 2) the lack of externally-required self-studies (like those required of academic units for accreditation), 3) the heterogeneity of support units relative to the more homogeneous academic units, and 4) the unfamiliarity of campus leaders, having academic backgrounds, with the many functional areas necessary to support a large, complex organization. In practice this difference in emphasis has been brought to light by faculty members who, in the midst of a self-study or an activity analysis, ask whether support staff are subject to the same level of scrutiny that they are. Usually the answer is that they are not--and for reasons such as those listed.

In response to the apparent dearth of guidance on self-study within support units, the study reported herein sought to critically examine the self-study experience at one large, public regional university. The conclusions and recommendations derived are intended to contribute to the literature on this subject and to inform future practice, to the end that support units can participate more fully and effectively in institutional planning processes.

Institutional Setting

The institution in which this study was conducted is a public four-year regional university located in a midwestern state. Enrollment at the University in the fall of 1982 was approximately 15,000. The institution was originally established as one of five state normal schools; and as such, it has a seventy-five year history steeped in the traditions of teacher preparation. Only in the last fifteen years has the institution expanded its mission and scope to the point of being identified

as a comprehensive university. Despite this expansion the institution remains primarily an undergraduate institution with a relatively small graduate program at the master's level.

The administrative style of the institution may be characterized as informal and as autocratic--though benevolent. Informality of administration is evidenced by the relative absence of a systematic structure of planning and policy formulation. Decision making is highly centralized and is often reactive or crisis oriented. As the University has grown in complexity over the past 15 years, the prevailing administrative style has proven to be less and less effective in addressing major institutional problems.

In the fall of 1981, a Presidential planning council was appointed and charged with the task of designing a formal comprehensive planning system for the University. By the spring of 1982, major components of the system had been identified, defined, and described in detail to the President. During the 1982-83 academic year the preparation phase for planning was initiated. This phase included a study of external trends, the conduct of some 60-70 academic and support unit self-studies, a values assessment study which included the use of ETS's Institutional Goals Inventory, and a mission review study which will soon be completed. Yet to be initiated during the preparation phase are statements of planning assumptions and institutional goals and objectives. Completion of this aspect of the preparatory phase is expected by late summer of 1983.

Of particular relevance to this study was the self-study process which began in the fall of 1982. The self-study component of the planning system permitted units to assess past and present accomplishments, as well as to provide indications of future direction. This process was characterized by 1) self-study reports prepared by academic and support units in response to a self-assessment questionnaire, 2) summary reports prepared by major unit heads, and 3) a summary report providing an overview assessment of the University.

Methodology

To assess the self-study phase of the planning system as it related to support units, the decision was made to limit the analysis to a case study of four support units with diverse functions and purposes: Admissions and Records, Alumni and Development, Computer Services, and Personnel. Three sources of information provided the basic data required for the study: 1) self-study reports from each of the four support units (responses to a 30-item questionnaire), 2) interviews with directors of the four support units, and 3) interviews with members of an institutional self-study team who were responsible for reviewing all unit reports and preparing an overall assessment of the University.

The design of the first stage of the study required that the researchers independently read and evaluate the four self-study reports. Content analysis was used in evaluating each unit's responses to six areas of inquiry addressed in the self-study questionnaire. These areas were 1) description of unit purpose and goals, 2) description of the unit's major activities and their relationships to the unit's purpose and goals, 3) description of the inter-relationships between the unit and other academic or support units, 4) description of resources required to support the major activities of the unit, 5) evidence of a university-wide perspective in the unit's responses, and 6) evidence of a future-orientation in the unit responses. Each of the six content areas was evaluated using a five-point scale to aid in comparative assessment of unit responses and to provide a basis for assessing the degree of agreement between the independent evaluations of the researchers.

In the second stage of the study, each of the four support unit directors was interviewed to obtain information about three aspects of the self-study process: 1) the procedures employed in conducting the unit self-study, 2) the appropriateness of the questionnaire and accompanying guidelines, and 3) the benefits resulting from conducting the self-study.

The final stage of the study consisted of interviews with three members of a five-member institutional self-study team.

These interviews were conducted to ascertain the manner in which information contained in these reports was incorporated into their overall assessment of the University.

Findings

Findings are reported for each of the stages of data collection: review of self-study reports, interviews with support unit directors, and interviews with members of the institutional self-study team.

Self-Study Reports

The written responses to the self-study questionnaire were evaluated along six pre-determined dimensions. A high degree of consensus was found in the ratings of the responses by the researchers. Subsequent collaboration yielded the findings noted in the following sections.

Purpose and Goals. Statements of purpose and goals were not expressed clearly in three of the four reports. Two problems were most evident. The primary problem was the apparent lack of careful analysis of major functional areas. References to some functional areas were omitted in units' statements of goals. For example, in the clearest of the statements, from Personnel, reference to salary administration was noticeably absent. In a second example, from Computer Services, no mention was made of providing access to computing resources for faculty, students, and staff. The second problem was that activities of a unit were frequently expressed as goal statements. For example, instead of stating its goal to coordinate and conduct university recruiting efforts, Admissions and Records expressed two ways to accomplish the goal of recruitment: "To develop recruiting ... techniques" and "To present the university to the prospective student." Similarly, Alumni and Development stated the goal to "Attract and generate private funds for the University" and then followed that statement with another specifying a way to achieve that goal, "To enlist the interest, support, and efforts of as many volunteers as possible." References to important areas of

responsibility were omitted in several cases and activities were expressed as goal statements in other cases.

Major Activities. Three of the four units described major activities clearly and comprehensively. Only one of the units, however, attempted to relate major activities to the goals they supported.

Inter-relationships. Expressions of the effects of other units on the reporting unit were more complete than were the reporting unit's expression of its effect on other units. The inter-related units were not identified in some cases nor were the services or effects involved clearly described.

Resource Needs. Two of the units provided no indication of the activities that required additional resources, only that more resources were needed "to do a better job." The responses of the other two units provided information about the ways in which additional resources would be used.

University-wide Perspective. In their identification of major issues facing the University, all four of the units identified relevant issues that were university-wide: for example, re-allocation of resources, morale of personnel, internal communication, declining enrollments, declining funding, etc. Two of the units, however, reflected narrower perspectives by only mentioning issues that directly influence their major areas of responsibility. The report from Personnel emphasized "attracting and maintaining qualified employees." The report from Alumni and Development emphasized funding as an issue, including how the University's constituents perceive its handling of funds.

Future Orientation. In response to the request to describe short- and long-range planning in the unit, three of the four units identified tasks or activities they intended to complete. Two of the units proposed how additional staff could serve the unit and provided organizational charts that indicated areas of responsibility and reporting lines. No evidence, however, of a planning process or of goal setting was found.

Support Unit Directors

Findings from interviews with the four support unit directors were related to three sets of questions: about the procedures used in the self-study, about the usefulness of the questionnaire, and about benefits to the unit of participating in the self-study.

Procedures. Two points of procedure were of special interest to the researchers--involvement of professional staff and the use of reference documents in the self-study. In one unit the director is the only professional staff person. In two of the remaining three units, full participation of the professional staff was evident. In the third unit, despite the presence of about a dozen professional staff, the report was prepared by the unit director and his immediate superior.

All four of the units reported using reference materials in their self-studies. Alumni and Development utilized a previously-prepared Gift Management Plan, a program audit conducted by a development specialist from another university, and gift records for recent years. The Personnel report made use of prior years' budget requests and self-audit materials from the College and University Personnel Association. Self-audit materials were also used by Admissions and Records, along with previously written statements of planning assumptions and unit goals. Computer Services referred to a required state-level report on computer hardware and software systems.

Questionnaire. The four directors were generally positive in assessing the questionnaire instrument. They perceived the individual questions to be clearly stated and relevant to their units. One unit director, though, felt that the instrument contained unnecessary redundancy. He suggested that questions about planned changes in goals, major activities, and relationships with other units were asking for the same responses. This same unit director also made a very pertinent point about being hindered in his self-study by the lack of information about university priorities.

Benefits. Three of the four directors reported that they and their units found the self-study process to be beneficial for a number of reasons:

- 1) Good intentions were turned into actual attention to self-assessment and planning issues.
- 2) Tentative plans became crystallized.
- 3) The self-study report provided a legitimized means of expressing both strengths and concerns.
- 4) Communications among staff members were re-established.
- 5) Common unit goals were reinforced.
- 6) Self-study deliberations aided preparation of budget requests.

Self-study Review

Also of interest to the researchers are the ways in which information from and about support units is used in institutional decisions. Unfortunately, the planning process described herein has not progressed far enough to allow analysis of priority setting for goals, activities, or budgets. The self-study process, however, has culminated in a summary report providing an overall assessment of the University. This summary required incorporating the reports of all support units. While the report only summarizes units' self-assessments, nevertheless, judgments of what to include and what to emphasize were necessary.

Interviews with three members of the institutional self-study team revealed the group's strategy for developing their summary. The primary tool of analysis was a two-dimensional spread sheet with units named along one dimension and main points from self-study reports along the other. Check marks on the spread sheet indicated the points made by each unit and which points were made by more than one unit. The reviewers reported attempting to capture and fairly represent all the main points expressed, whether the unit was academic or support. The presence of two support persons on the review team helped ensure an appropriate balance. The more difficult task remains--that of integrating and prioritizing academic and support goals, activities, and budget requests.

Examination of information from the study's three sources yielded findings about the self-study procedures and the resulting reports. Review of the self-study reports revealed limited understanding of the distinctions between statements of goals and major activities. In addition, other aspects of the reports were not characterized by adequate levels of detail and comprehensiveness. Explanation was found lacking in the descriptions of the relationships of activities to goals, the inter-relationships between units, and the activities requiring additional resources. Two units were seen as having relatively narrow perspectives on university-wide issues. Future orientations in the units were evidenced primarily by statements of intended activities rather than by planning processes or statements of goals.

In addition, findings from two sets of interviews were reported. The support unit directors, in two of the three units with professional staffs, reported involving their staffs in the self-study and all unit directors indicated using existing reference documents in their studies. Despite the shortcomings found in the questionnaire responses, all four unit directors perceived the questionnaire items to be clearly stated and relevant to their units. Three of the four directors reported benefits of the study process for their units. Interviews with members of the institutional self-study team provided an explanation of how self-study reports from academic and support units were incorporated into an overall assessment of the university.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Interpretation of the findings from this case study led to the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. **Conduct self-study orientation sessions for unit heads and professional staff.** The findings indicate that the support unit directors had a limited understanding of the nature of self-study, as evidenced by the omission of statements regarding relevant functions, activities, resources and plans. If self-studies among support units are to be

- effective, it is essential that the purpose and potential use of the outcomes from this assessment process be clearly communicated.
2. **Conduct training sessions on writing goal statements.** The results of the study suggest that the unit directors had difficulty distinguishing goals from activities. This problem was indicated by numerous references to task-oriented responsibilities as goals. Formal training, coupled with practice exercises and critiques of written goal statements, may help administrators write meaningful, measurable, and communicable goals.
 3. **Provide detailed guidelines and sample responses to accompany self-study questionnaires.** The incompleteness and redundancy found in responses to the self-study questionnaire indicates the need to provide ample illustrations to clarify the intent of specific questions.
 4. **Encourage professional staff participation in the self-study process.** Full participation of the professional staff seemed to be related to more comprehensive self-study reports. One unit reporting full participation also reported that common goals were reinforced, communication was strengthened, and staff commitment and cohesiveness was fostered.
 5. **Provide periodic consultation to support units during the self-study.** Inexperience of support unit directors with the process of self-study, as previously noted, highlights the need to provide continued guidance, clarification, and instruction.

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